

VZCZCXRO7887
OO RUEHROV
DE RUEHDS #3460/01 3641436
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 291436Z DEC 08 ZDK ZUI RUEACSA3123 3661237
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3247
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUZEFAA/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEPADJ/CJTF HOA PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 003460

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/25/2018
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KJUS](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: HARASSING THE OPPOSITION

REF: A. ADDIS 2817
[1](#)B. ADDIS 3159

ADDIS ABAB 00003460 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is an action request. Please see para 5.

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) In the most overt case of harassment of the political opposition since the April local elections, the Ethiopian Government (GoE) has detained Birtukan Mideksa, Chairperson of the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party, three times in the three weeks and today arrested her. Birtukan is a former political detainee who, along with over 100 other opposition figures, was convicted and sentenced in the aftermath of the May 2005 elections and later pardoned in July 2007 through intensive efforts by the U.S., other donors, and the "Ethiopian Elders." While on a outreach tour of Europe in November, Birtukan (technically correct) told reporters that she and the other political detainees "did not request any pardon of the government." Apparently offended by the statement which effectively denies the GoE the appearance of being compassionate by attributing the pardon to the Elders, the GoE is now on the brink of rescinding Birtukan's pardon, an act which could place our 2009 International Woman of Courage nominee (Ref. A) in prison for 15 years. If the GoE pursues charges against Birtukan along with today's arrest, or worse, rescinds her pardon, the USG must make a public statement condemning this clear harassment of the opposition in light of the very overt and public role of the USG in brokering the Elders engagement that brought about the July 2007 pardon. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) On December 10, the federal police detained and interrogated Birtukan Mideksa for having told a foreign media outlet that the detainees "did not request any pardon of the government." After several hours in custody, Birtukan was released, only to be picked up again at her home on December

[1](#)23. On that day, Birtukan told us that the police again asked her the same line of questioning as on December 10 to which she had no additional response. Birtukan and the other political detainees did sign a statement brokered by the Elders and supported heavily by the U.S. Embassy noting their "regret" for any "mistakes" they had made and asking the GoE for "forgiveness as is customary." While the understanding surrounding that statement was that if the detainees signed it, the GoE would pardon them, the detainees never verbally or in writing actually requested a pardon.

¶3. (U) With GoE pressure on Birtukan mounting, the French Ambassador and Vice Chair of the Ethiopian Elders Pastor Daniel Gebreselassie worked closely with Birtukan in recent days to devise a simple statement that she could present to the government that clarified that while the detainees did not go through the standard legal process for requesting a pardon, she recognizes that it was the GoE, and not the Elders, who granted it. Pastor Daniel, who is also the Chairman of the Pardon Board, told the Ambassador today, however, that the Pardon Board voted yesterday seven-to-one in favor of revoking Birtukan's pardon. If the pardon is revoked, Birtukan would be imprisoned immediately to serve her 15 year sentence without the possibility of parole, according to Pastor Daniel. Upon hearing this, the Ambassador called Ethiopian President Girma Woldegiorgis requesting that he delay signing the revocation while we work with Birtukan on resolving this matter.

¶4. (C) We received a call from UDJ Vice Chairman Temesgen Zewdie on December 29 saying that Birtukan was again detained at 2:30 p.m. while meeting with Pastor Daniel. Temesgen told us at 4:45 p.m. that when detained Birtukan was accompanied by senior UDJ official Prof. Mesfin Woldemariam and a chauffeur. Both were reportedly "beaten up" by the police officials and Prof. Mesfin is now en route to a hospital. (Note: Nearly 80 years old, Prof. Mesfin is a renown academic on human rights issues and was among the political detainees pardoned in 2007. End Note.) Contacts within the federal police have told us that, unlike previous detentions, this time Birtukan has been arrested and is back at Kaliti Prison. Ambassador again called President Girma at 5:00 p.m. The President reported that he has not/not yet signed the pardon revocation as he promised the Ambassador to do this morning,

ADDIS ABAB 00003460 002.3 OF 002

and expressed frustration that the police had arrested Birtukan. Still, Girma told Ambassador that the police can always arrest Birtukan for new offenses, and only the Prime Minister can reverse that order. Pol/Econ Chief protested the arrest to the Foreign Ministry's Director General for Europe and the Americas Tesfaye Yilma. Ambassador is contacting Prime Minister Meles' office now to request a meeting on this.

COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST

¶5. (SBU) As Birtukan is the most recognized leader of Ethiopia's political opposition, this harassment sends a clear message to the broader opposition community. The detentions, harassment, and arrest of Birtukan represent the latest and most blatant incidence of a string of arrests and harassment of opposition party officials in the past few months (Ref. B). As Birtukan's statements to the European press are factually true, the GoE has little excuse for this current harassment. As the international community clearly associates the July 2007 pardon of Birtukan and the other political detainees as heavily influenced by the USG, her re-arrest will likely be viewed by many as an affront to the USG. If the GoE pursues charges against Birtukan along with today's arrest, or if the GoE rescinds her pardon, we strongly urge Washington to release a strongly worded statement condemning the move and resuscitate language from our January 6, 2006 public statement noting that "steps that appear to criminalize dissent impede progress on democratization." End Comment.
YAMAMOTO